Reconceiving: Using Combination and Repetition to Your Advantage

AUBREY MARKS
Produced in Heather Wayne's Spring 11 ENC1101

Introduction

Having the ability to identify and to fully understand elements of your composing process are two very different things. Identifying a behavior will bring your attention to it, but the only way to learn about how that behavior will affect you is to understand it completely. Using previous research completed by Sondra Perl and Carol Berkenkotter, I was able to identify reconceiving as a large component of my composing process, but I still did not understand it in its entirety.

In their studies, both Perl and Berkenkotter identified a particular behavior in which a writer would, in Berkenkotter's words, "scan and rescan one's text from the perspective of an external reader and to continue re-drafting until all rhetorical, formal, and stylistic concerns have been resolved, or until the writer decides to let go of the text" (223). Berkenkotter defined it as reconceiving, while Perl called its "retrospective structuring" (207). They also noticed that writers used this behavior as a tactic in order to find the right words to say while writing. According to Perl, "writers know more fully what they mean only *after* they have written it," saying that this reconceiving process made writers churn out words in order to make sense of what they were writing (208). I immediately identified with this process and had an understanding of what I was doing while in my composing process, but I was still confused as to how the process worked or why I was doing it in the first place.

Although the work of each researcher was thorough, neither of them seemed to think of reconceiving as a behavior that was synthesized into the rest of the composing process. In other words, both recognized reconceiving as a behavior separate from that of planning, writing, and editing. However, thinking about my own experiences with reconceiving, I knew that reconceiving was not separate from the rest of these behaviors, and that reconceiving was present throughout my entire writing process. Additionally, neither researcher accounted for the portion of the writing process that was devoted to reconceiving.

While examining my own writing process, I concluded that the research done by Perl and Berkenkotter had provided me with enough information to *identify* reconceiving in my composing process, but not enough to completely understand what specific actions were taken *while* I was writing. As a result, I took their research one step further, by analyzing reconceiving as a complex process, instead of simply identifying it as a noticeable behavior. I did this by conducting a study on my composing process, then further examining the process of reconceiving. I discovered that reconceiving is a very complex combination and repetition of planning, writing, and editing behaviors.

Methodology

In order to study the process of reconceiving, I simulated a composing session using a think-aloud protocol, a method used by both Perl and Berkenkotter in which a writer verbalizes their

thoughts while writing in order to measure behaviors performed in the composing process. The think-aloud protocol was recorded with a microphone and the Sound Recorder program on Windows 7. During the composing session, I wrote a reading response for the article "Rigid Rules, Inflexible Plans, and the Stifling of Language" by Mike Rose. The response was approximately two pages in length and was completed in under an hour.

I analyzed the session by writing a transcript of the audio recording, and then coded the transcript so I could comprehensibly track my composing behaviors. For the code, the behaviors were divided into categories of planning, editing, talking, writing and reading; then subdivided into activities such as planning globally, reading written text, and editing word choice. After coding, I tallied the number of occurrences for each behavior, determined the total amount of behavioral occurrences, and then measured the number of each separate behavior against the total number of occurrences. This helped me to understand how much time I spent displaying certain behaviors while writing. These results can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1 General Composing Behaviors

Composing Behavior	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of total activity
Planning	46	14%
Writing	117	36%
Editing	55	17%
Unrelated/Talking	63	19%
Reading	47	14%
Total	328	100%

Table 2 Specific Composing Behaviors

Composing Behavior	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of total activity
EF-edit formatting	4	1.23%
ER-reconceiving	27	8.28%
ESP-editing spelling	3	.92%
EWC-editing word choice	12	3.68%
FP-flip page	8	2.45%
PG-planning global	38	11.66%
PL-planning local	1	.31%
PP-pauses	22	6.75%
PRN-read notes	1	.3%
PRQ-read question	12	3.68%
PRS-reading source	7	2.15%
PRW-reading writing	27	8.28%
UO-distractions from others	1	.31%
UP-pause	3	.92%
UT-talking	50	15.34%
WL-writing long	14	4.29%
WS-writing short	96	29.45%
Total	326	100%

Before analyzing my data tables, I had expected to find a large percentage of my total activity devoted to reconceiving. However, according to Table 2, I had reconceiving for only 8.28% of my composing process. Finding this odd, I listened to my audio-recording of the composing session for a second time, and realized that I had reconceived in areas that were otherwise marked as planning, editing, and writing. In fact, I determined that I was not able to write without reconceiving, and for that reason, these three behaviors could not be viewed as separate in the composing process.

It was obvious that the data from Tables 1 and 2 did not accurately depict reconceiving. Therefore, I created Tables 3 and 4 in order to emphasize reconceiving's role in my composing process. To create Table 3, I took the number of occurrences and percentages of total activity for planning, writing, and editing from Table 1 in order to find the total general percentage of the time I devoted to reconceiving. To create Table 4, I took the specific planning, writing, and editing behaviors from Table 2 and added the totals to find the total amount of time I spent performing those specific reconceiving behaviors. In other words, the information from Tables 1 and 2 is not different from the information in Tables 3 and 4; it was only reorganized to more clearly show the amount of time that was spent reconceiving during my writing process.

Table 3 General Reconceiving Behaviors

Composing Behavior	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of total activity
Planning	46	14%
Writing	117	36%
Editing	55	17%
Reconceiving Total/ Overall Total	218/328	**67%**

Table 4 Specific Reconceiving Behaviors

Composing Behavior	Number of Occurrences	Percentage of total activity
ER- reconceiving (marked)	27	8.28%
EWC-editing word choice	12	3.68%
PG-planning global	38	11.66%
PP-pauses	22	6.75%
PRW-reading written text	27	8.28%
WS-writing short	96	29.45%
Reconceiving Total/ Overall Total	222/326	**68.10%**

While analyzing my transcript, I noticed a pattern present in my reconceiving process. A "burst" of writing would start with global planning (PG), reading my notes (PRN), or reading the source (PRS). I would tend to move back and forth between these three behaviors before I was even able to write something down. From there, I wrote a short phrase (WS), paused (PP), or read what I had previously written (PRW), and then switched back and forth between *those* three behaviors until the cycle was ready to begin again. This is demonstrated by the flow chart below.
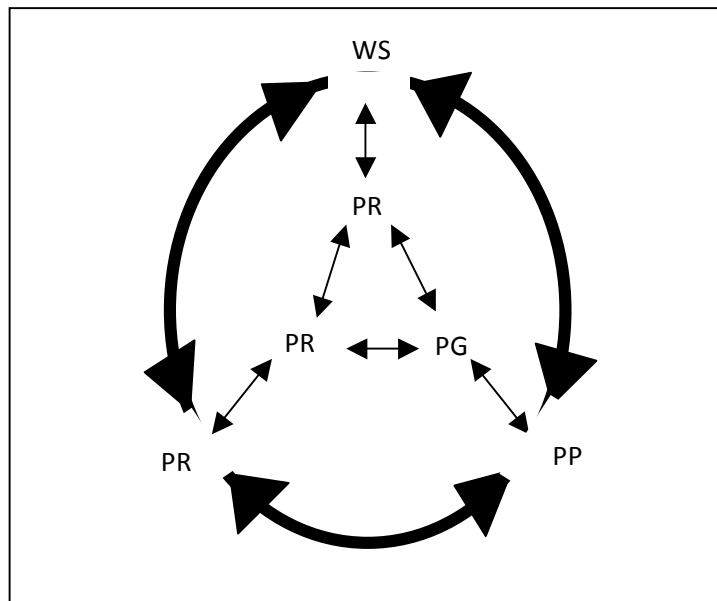
Results

By reorganizing and reevaluating my data, I was able to recognize that reconceiving consists of planning, writing, and editing *while* writing. Therefore, these separate behaviors had to be viewed collectively to accurately represent the amount of time that is spent reconceiving during the composing process. The data from Tables 3 and 4 show that reconceiving is present during approximately two-thirds of the writing process in both the general and specific categories. This is significant because it shows that the actions that make up the reconceiving process are implemented approximately twice as much as any other action that is taken while composing.

These actions that form reconceiving are executed in what is best described as a cycle, where reconceiving behaviors follow a recursive pattern for each sentence that is written. By creating the flow chart, I was able to find a distinct pattern in the reconceiving process; therefore, I was able to further specify the exact behaviors in the reconceiving process and the order in which they occurred.

I would start the reconceiving process by entering Phase I of the cycle, where I would plan globally, read my notes, or read the source before writing a new sentence. By planning globally, I was trying to determine the general purpose and content of the next sentence. If I read my notes or the source, I was looking for either inspiration (an idea that they could start their sentence with) or information (a direct quote or concept, for example). For example, while writing my reading response, I had started reconceiving by looking through the source for a point of information that I remembered to add into a paragraph:

> [pause, flips pages] There's something that I liked that I starred. [reads from source] Students that offer the least precise rules and plans have the least trouble composing. Um…composing calls for open, even adventurous thinking, not for constrained, no-exit cognition.

I started Phase I of the reconceiving cycle by reading the source simply because I did not know where my paragraph was headed—I needed an idea in order to start writing. Once I found the information I was looking for, I knew exactly what I was going to write about, and quickly transitioned into Phrase II of the reconceiving cycle, even though I did not necessarily plan globally or read my notes. It is important to note that these behaviors would occur interchangeably and I did not have to display all three behaviors in order to enter Phase II of the reconceiving cycle.

Once I had everything I needed in order to write the next sentence, I entered Phase II of the cycle, where I would either read what I previously had written, begin to write my sentence, or pause before doing either. After transitioning from Phase I to Phase II in the previous example, I performed all three of the Phase II reconceiving behaviors.

I transitioned from Phase I into Phase II of the reconceiving cycle by first pausing before writing. Shortly after, I slipped into a cycle of writing phrases, re-reading those phrases, and pausing before again writing more phrases.

> [pause] *Rose argued that students are so…*that *students block…*[reread, backspace] *that "blocker" students* [pause] *constrain themselves so much* [pause] *with rules and plans that they* [pause] *they back themselves into a corner while writing, therefore, they get writer's block.*

In this instance, Phase II of the reconceiving cycle allowed me to quickly plow through the sentence by adding short phrases that further developed my ideas, while simultaneously evaluating what I had written and deciding what I would write next.

After taking one of these actions, I would either return back to Phase I of the cycle (in which case the cycle would restart), or continue to repeat the behaviors in Phase II. If I stayed in Phase II, I would jump back and forth between reading what I had previously written, writing parts of the sentence, and pausing, forming a certain recursiveness in my process. The reconceiving process would end only when I was satisfied in one way or another with what I had written, and the cycle would promptly begin again as I prepared to write my next sentence.

Discussion

Throughout my reconceiving process, the many distinct patterns of repetition that had formed had followed the flow chart I had created. For example, before writing, "He studied these students by looking at their previous works, then conducting interviews with each student. In doing so, he analyzed the 'processing period' of each writer, or the planning stages and strategies that each students used in order to write their paper…" [See Appendix D], I had begun to reconceive. I entered Phase I of the cycle by planning globally in order to formulate an idea of what I was going to write, and then wrote a long portion of the sentence:

> He studied these students by looking at their previous works, and then conducting an interview with each *student, he noted the "processing period" of each writer, and analyzed the "processing period" of each writer, which the writer is*…[backspace].

After, I reread my notes to make sure that the information I had written was correct ("He analyzed the "processing period" of each writer…"). Then, I jumped into a repeating cycle of writing short phrases and rereading what I had just written, and continued to do so until the sentence was complete:

> *…or the planning stages and strategies…* He analyzed the "processing period of each writer, or the planning stages and strategies *that each student used to write their…*He studied these students by looking at their previous works, then conducting interviews with each student. He…then analyzed the processing period*…in doing so…so, in doing so,* he analyzed the "processing period" of each writer, or the planning stages and strategies that each students used *in order to write their paper*.

This repetition shows that the reconceiving cycle runs on recursiveness, simply because I simultaneously swung back and forth between what I had written, and what my mind had already corrected. Reconceiving in this way allowed me to make little bursts of progress in writing the sentence. By repeating the behaviors of rereading what I had written and writing short phrases and words after that, I was able to keep moving forward into the sentence, and eventually finished writing it.

The other characteristic of reconceiving is the variability of the composing behaviors that combine to form the process of reconceiving. While analyzing the transcript of the think-aloud protocol from the composing section, it became very obvious that reconceiving could not be accomplished without the combined efforts of planning, writing, editing, and their sub-behaviors. In the following example, I (subconsciously) used a combination of writing short phrases, reading what I had previously written, reading my notes, and planning globally:

> *Throughout my writing career, personally, [pause] there are some rules of "good writing" that I have followed for many years, and many I have chosen to break.*

[rereads] no. personally, no. [backspace] *There are certain rules of good writing that I have followed…that I…*[clicks to edit typo] for years, such as [pause] *outlining*…such as outlining *my entire paper before I write it*, [pause] *providing a "hook" at the beginning of each essay*, [pause] I don't want to say that, the personally part. [starts a new line of text below the paragraph] *There are certain rules of writing that I have been taught to follow for years*, and I'll delete the original part so that it reads: There are certain rules of writing that I have been taught to follow for years, such as to outline my entire essay, to provide a "hook" at the beginning of each essay, to organize my essay into a five…*into a traditional, into an FCAT-style five paragraph essay, and providing large amount of evidence to* [pause] *support my thesis statement.*

By using reconceiving behaviors as tools for composing, I created a sentence that was in coherence with the rest of the paragraph and the main idea of the essay, factually accurate, and satisfactorily worded. While it may seem that reconceiving only hinders the composing process, it is actually the combination of these behaviors that makes reconceiving a functional, progressive process, *not* an ineffective system that keeps writers writing in circles.

Conclusion

I have concluded that reconceiving is a complex cycle of repeated planning, editing, and writing behaviors. By using Perl and Berkenkotter's research as a basis for studying my own composing process, I have determined the specific behaviors and the order of their occurrences in the reconceiving process to make the process more comprehensive and approachable, so that others may have the opportunity to understand their own reconceiving processes. As a result of my study, reconceiving can now be viewed and studied as an integrative cycle and a process. As the subject of this study, I have learned what it really means to reconceive: to reconceive is to turn a special pattern of repetition into a fluent rhythm that helps to create sentences of quality throughout the entire composing process.

Works Cited

Berkenkotter, Carol. "Decisions and Revisions: The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer." Wardle and Downs 218-30.

Perl, Sondra. "The Composing Processes of Unskilled College Writers." Wardle and Downs 192-214.

Wardle, Elizabeth and Doug Downs, eds. *Writing about Writing: A College Reader*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011. Print.